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## **ETA's Endgame: Exploring the Reasons Behind ETA's Definitive Cessation of Armed Violence Without Having Achieved its Objective**

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**BSc Political Science: International Relations & Organizations**

*Bachelor Thesis*



**ETA's Endgame**

*Exploring the Reasons Behind ETA's Definitive Cessation of Armed Violence Without Having  
Achieved its Objective*

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## 1. Introduction

Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), means Basque Homeland and Liberty and was deemed Europe's last active terrorist organization (Llera, et al., 1993). The organization has been linked to over 3500 attacks which have resulted in an estimated 800 deaths and 7000 injuries (Alonso, 2011; Rengel, 2021; Aizpeolea, 2017). ETA was founded in 1959 as a nationalist group with a far-left ideology aiming to separate from Spain and become an independent Basque nation (Zabalo & Saratxo, 2015). It is essential to highlight that ETA is considered to be both a violent escalation of a social movement and a secessionist terrorist group. It was due to their armed activities that many states and international organizations classified it as a terrorist group (Burns, 2011; Alonso, 2016). Thus, this thesis will analyze literature on both social movements and terrorism to help provide the most thorough analysis possible.

Social movements can be categorized in various ways, one of which is whether they are non-violent or violent in their mobilization strategies. There has been broad research conducted on social movements, and most scholars agree that a social movement has a higher chance of achieving its objective through the use of non-violent tactics (Muñoz & Anduiza, 2019). Moreover, societal support is considered one of the key elements for a movement to succeed. Thus, the escalation to violence by social organizations hinders the legitimacy of their purposes and the external support they might have had before. It can be seen that the rational choice suggests that violence is not beneficial within the cost-benefit analysis. However, social organizations sometimes end up resorting to it for reasons such as collective identity grievances (Forest, 2018, p. 77).

Extensive previous research on terrorist groups and violent social movements suggests that once the violent acts have occurred, the group continues carrying them out, as the non-violent legitimacy of the movement has all but diminished (Bosi et al., 2019). Consequently, this thesis focuses on why a secessionist terrorist group such as ETA would suddenly decide in 2011 to declare a “definitive cessation of its armed activities” (Alonso, 2016). This is taking into account that ETA had been heavily invested in perpetuating violent actions as a means to achieve its goals, already finding itself very deep into the violence.

Terrorism is a very broad concept that encompasses several different types, which creates difficulties when developing counterterrorism policies to address it. This research is highly

relevant in terms of policy development, as the cases of social movements that escalate into terrorist tactics cannot be approached in the same way as, for example, jihadist terrorism. This is due to their differing underlying characteristics; as the political context where the violence of social movements emerges is vital to understand what leads these terrorist groups to do a permanent ceasefire (Kassimeris, 2018).

As for societal implications, research on secessionist groups such as ETA will aid future generations regarding the lessons learned from the conflict. These types of conflict involve human rights violations, so it is essential to have a discourse about reparations so that victims and communities obtain the recognition, justice, and help that they deserve. Lastly, when a terrorist group ceases violence, it transforms the previous socio-political context of fear and uncertainty. As in the case of ETA it was key for the perception and shaping of the post-violence Basque nationalist discourse and political opinions and participation.

This research intends to qualitatively assess the specific cases in which terrorism is perpetuated and then ceased when the group was not founded as nor intended to be violent, as there is little literature on the topic. Furthermore, it is essential to know what factors contribute more to the ending of secessionist terrorist groups, which is what this research intends to do (Gaibulloev & Sandler, 2013). Thus, the research question this thesis will aim to respond to is: *Why does a secessionist terrorist group cease its armed violence without having achieved its objective?*

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1 Nationalism, Secessionism and Terrorism***

Terrorist groups with an ideology of nationalism or secession are the main focus of this research. What makes secessionist terrorism different from other forms of terrorism is that their motivation emerges from sociopolitical grievances, such as repression by the state and authorities, ethnic injustices, discrimination and political instability (Silke, 2018; Forest, 2018). Additionally, the repression these groups are subject to may accelerate and make them rationalize their desire to have an independent territory and state (Forest, 2018, p. 74). Thus, the aim of self-determination is fueled by the feeling of betrayal towards their historical and cultural heritage by their own state.

Secessionist terrorist groups share a common characteristic with each other: the conflict in which they are involved is asymmetric in its nature. This means that the members of the group engage in tactics of terrorism to compensate for the fact that the central government of the state they want to separate from is much more powerful in terms of capabilities (Duerr, 2018, p. 16). Moreover, the states tend to portray themselves as being legitimate in their use of force and repression against mobilizations that aim at separating from the state (p. 17). This is why in times of desperation and lack of success through non-violent means, many nationalist and separatist groups have resorted to violent means to make themselves heard and try to achieve their independence, resulting in terrorism (Forest, 2018).

Secessionist movements such as ETA have their roots in nationalism, whose rhetoric they use to mobilize and incentivize their members and followers. However, with many nationalist secession movements, secession has rarely been achieved, especially in countries with a long-established democracy. This is because secessionist organizations that become violent and employ terrorist tactics are usually not seen positively by society (Duerr, 2018, p. 17). Moreover, the use of violence justifies even more government repression, and the group could be categorized by the state or international community as terrorist, bringing counterterrorist measures into the picture (Davenport, 2007).

## ***2.2 Terrorist Groups That End Before Achieving Their Objective***

The reviewed literature makes use of both a social movement and terrorism lens. The reason for this is that this research is about contentious politics and social movements that have had an escalation to violence becoming terrorist groups. Thus, retrieving literature from both topics is appropriate to provide the most thorough literature review.

Within the stages of the social movement life cycle, the last one, which this research focuses on is decline; this can mean four things: repression, co-optation, success, and failure (Christiansen, 2017, p. 19). In terms of the decline of terrorist campaigns, Dudouet (2013) refers to six different trajectories: “decapitation (through the capture or killing of the leadership), success (achieving the objective), failure (implosion, backlash or marginalization), repression (through the use of force), negotiation (transition towards a

legitimate political process) and, finally, a reorientation to other forms of violence (criminality, insurgency, major war)” (p. 404).

When investigating the ending of terrorist groups, the reviewed literature on both previously mentioned approaches shows that the main common reason is repression by the authorities, which can be seen in *Table 1*. Repression happens when authorities utilize measures to control or eradicate a social movement. This can be done by passing laws or using violence toward the social movement if they are declared dangerous to the public (Christiansen, 2017, p. 19). Moreover, that is linked to the failure of terrorist and social groups, as they might also fail to achieve their objective due to a lack of strategic capabilities or organizational consensus. It can also be because of the incapability of handling rapid expansions that lead to factionalism and encapsulation (p. 21). Lastly, the capture or killing of group leadership is considered as an individual category in *Table 1*. For the purposes of this research, however, it will fall under the category of repression by the authorities as it is a counterterrorist measure (Perliger & Weinberg, 2017).

*Table 1. How Terrorist Groups End (Perliger & Weinberg, 2010)*

<u>Outcome</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Capture or killing of group leadership	71	30.6%
Repression by the authorities	51	21.9%
Group abandons terrorism in favor of non-violent tactics	29	12.5%
Merger with another terrorist group	28	12.1%
Group achieves its goals	18	7.7%
Loss of public support	10	4.3%
Internal ideological disputes and power struggles	8	3.4%
Loss of state support (for groups that were state supported)	8	3.4%
Failure to recruit a new generation	6	2.5%
Group adopts other types of violence	3	1.2%

This research considers the terrorist group’s cessation of armed violence and failure to achieve its objective as outcomes of interest. This is because not only do they share elements and complement each other, but also one can be the succession of the other. The existing literature is mostly focused on individual processes and cycles of (de)radicalization, whereas

group dynamics are more complex and difficult to analyze and need further research. There are various reasons why people abandon terrorism that exist at both individual and group levels. These include disillusionment with leaders, realization, lack of success of violent means and disengagement from faith or belief (Bakker & De Roy Van Zuijdewijn, 2022, p. 157). Consequently, nowadays, there are deradicalization programs that aid people in leaving extremism and terrorist groups, both from individual and collective ideological deradicalization. For collective deradicalization, tactics of behavioral change through political negotiation are used, such as de-commissioning arms and ceasefires (p. 160).

### ***2.3 ETA's Abandonment of Armed Violence***

The current literature on the reasons behind the decision of terrorists to abandon terrorism has been studied by several scholars, which will be discussed in this section. In the case of ETA, research shows that the stabilization of the political context after the transition from the dictatorship was essential (Alonso, 2011; Zabalo & Saratxo, 2015; Murua, 2017). The newly founded democracy helped shift the options and beliefs that people had at their disposal as the political opportunity structure changed with the regime shift and establishment. There was an administrative decentralization where the Basque Country was given a high level of autonomy as a historical community, which was a step towards a better understanding and peaceful coexistence (Murua, 2017).

As aforementioned, ETA's members and supporters experienced the transition from dictatorship to democracy in Spain. Simultaneously, there was a shift in the international and national perspectives on violence, which meant a significant loss in support and legitimacy for ETA (Zabalo & Saratxo, 2015; Murua, 2017). While democracy was stabilizing in Spain, it reached a point where ETA could not achieve more societal support and expansion than it already had (p. 373). On the contrary, the previous societal support or plain indifference by the populace towards ETA's actions shifted towards clear rejection (Zabalo & Saratxo, 2015, p. 373).

Subsequently, another key factor that has been researched regarding ETA's unilateral decision to abandon armed violence was the loss of internal support it suffered, as tensions progressively arose within ETA (Alonso, 2016; Murua, 2017). The persistence in using violent means when the strategy was proven to be ineffective led to an enormous loss of



support both from its members and also from the Basque citizens (Mahoney, 2018). Furthermore, the security bodies' dissociation from the negative image they bore during the authoritarian regime was another cause for the exponential decrease in the support of violence (Alonso, 2011).

The French aid to the Spanish counterterrorist measures against ETA was also a key factor in its definitive ceasefire and posterior dismantlement (Alonso, 2016; Zabalo & Saratxo, 2015). Both states coordinated operations that heavily reduced ETA's operational capacity, leading to a gradual decrease in ETA's armed violence and an increase in ETA members' arrests and convictions. Additionally, the Spanish government banned the organizations that made up the Basque Nationalist Left and closed newspapers that supported ETA's actions (Zabalo & Saratxo, 2015). Lastly, ETA was subjected to intense police and judicial pressure by Spain, suffering from a military-operational crisis that hindered its capacities and could not overcome. This all happened on top of the already firm position of the Spanish government to not negotiate with the terrorist group (Murua, 2017).

Concluding, this literature review has first examined the literature on nationalism, secessionism and terrorism. It has then analyzed the existing literature regarding the reasons why terrorist groups decide to abandon armed violence altogether without having reached their purpose. This has helped establish the general knowledge of these types of terrorist groups and the many possible reasons for terrorist groups ending. Finally, it has reviewed the different possible reasons why ETA abandoned terrorism. Scholars have not reached a consensus on their theories and the main factors that were decisive in ETA's decision. Moreover, it can be seen that many authors' conclusions and findings are quite broad in the sense that they attribute ETA's end to multiple factors. Thus, further research needs to be carried out in order to obtain a clearer and more specific conclusion on this complex topic, which is what this thesis intends to do.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

#### ***3.1 Conceptualization***

In the following section, the independent and dependent variables will be conceptualized to make sense of the different concepts that will be used throughout the research. The research

question of this thesis is: *Why does a secessionist terrorist group cease its armed violence without having achieved its objective?*

On the one hand, the dependent variable (Y) is the secessionist terrorist group's decision to cease its armed violence without having achieved its objective of independence. On the other hand, the independent variable (X) would be the "Why", so the factors that contribute to the decision made by the secessionist terrorist group, ETA in this case, to abandon armed violence. In this research, several factors could potentially indicate why a secessionist terrorist group like ETA would decide to stop using armed violence. Nevertheless, those factors will be narrowed down and justified after the theoretical framework is concluded to reach this thesis' hypotheses.

To conceptualize the dependent variable this theoretical framework will define the terms *terrorism* and *ceasefire* as to provide a clearer picture of what this thesis consists of. Firstly, Bakker & de Roy van Zuijdewijn (2022) state in their book that terrorism is a very contested term among scholars and experts on the topic. Therefore, multiple definitions of terrorism with different scopes and specifications exist nowadays, even if reaching a consensus could be favorable regarding law enforcement (p. 32-33). For the purpose of this research, terrorism is defined as "any action constitutes terrorism if it is intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians and noncombatants, with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a Government or international organization to do or abstain from doing an act" (Bakker & de Roy van Zuijdewijn, 2022, p. 42).

Secondly, regarding the cessation of armed violence, a ceasefire refers to a call or statement to end hostilities and a way of showing commitment to terminating the violence (Forster, 2015; UN, 2022). Ceasefires can be done unilaterally or through an agreement between the conflicting parties. However, there is no conclusive agreement among scholars on a sole definition. Thus, it can "range from a break in fighting to a specific conflict outcome, to a component of peace agreements, or a distinct agreement type" (Forster, 2015, p. 2). Ceasefires can be both temporary or definitive but in the case of this thesis and ETA, it was a permanent ceasefire decided unilaterally, which is equivalent to a definitive cessation of armed violence (UN, 2022). Lastly, this thesis also uses various terms interchangeably, such as cessation of armed violence and end or abandonment of terrorism.

### ***3.2 Theories***

This research utilizes one classical academic theory and two incorporated modern approaches that have been merged into a second theory, aiming to explain the underlying mechanisms connecting the variables. Terrorism has been more widely studied at an individual level. Nevertheless, it is as much a group phenomenon due to the socialization and individual dispositions interacting. This is added to the importance of collective identity and shared grievances that are present in secessionist and nationalist terrorism. Thus, the focus of this research and all the applicable theories will be on the group level.

First, Political Opportunity Theory is a classical approach within the field of social movement studies, which looks at terrorist groups as strategic and dependent on resources (Meyer, 2003; Bosi et al., 2019). This theory suggests that what prompts social organizations or terrorist groups to mobilize are their grievances and/or the objectives they want to achieve, looking at the “institutional environment in which they emerge and operate” (Bosi et al., 2019). This is added to the social and political contexts at the given time, allowing them to expand and carry out violent actions. Assuming that terrorists are strategic actors, this theory has been used to study why certain social movements are successful or not in carrying out different types of mobilization (Bosi et al., 2019). As such, terrorist groups will use a cost-benefit analysis to strategize and allocate their resources and capabilities to maximize results (Gaibulloev & Sandler, 2013). Thus, in order to achieve their objective, they have rationalized that violent means are the best available option. When that rationalization and cost-benefit analysis changes in favor of a ceasefire or a shift to non-violent means, terrorist groups will decide to cease armed activities.

Additionally, political opportunity theory believes that there needs to be an ‘opening’ of certain political aspects in order to give room for terrorist groups to act (Meyer, 2003, p. 128; Bosi et al., 2019). Shifts in the regime of a state, political instability, or changes in the elites’ composition are openings of political opportunity for mobilizations to happen. When those opportunities close, it eliminates the opportunity for violence. Thus, if the use of violence has more potential costs or risks than benefits due to a change in the political opportunity structure, then the most rational thing is to change the strategy (Meyer, 2003; Fisher et al., 2019). In the case of terrorist mobilization, the cessation of violence becomes the best course of action (Meyer, 2003, p. 130). This has been contested due to the fact that it has been

proven that terrorist organizations do not always act with rationality within the cost-benefit analysis.

Second, Davis et al. (2009) theorize direct state action as a key reason for the ending of terrorism. The state action can be directed towards the terrorist organization as a group, to individual people within the organization such as leaders or spokesmen, as well as the material resources and possible motivations. Direct state action is successful when it diminishes the capabilities of the terrorist groups and undermines the coercive power they hold through their threats and actions (p. 263). Davis et al. (2009) note important factors which can complement the effectiveness of direct state action and are not mutually exclusive among themselves. These are the existence of disputes and disagreements within the organization, strategic miscalculations, and strategic reversals such as the loss of (foreign) sanctuaries, which often come directly as a consequence of the direct state action. (Davis et al., 2009, p. 264).

Bosi et al. 2019, present a dynamic approach to contentious politics which includes several mechanisms that are integrated into the theory of Davis et al. (2009). They argue that political opportunity theory is often criticized for being too fixed and stable. Consequently, in the dynamic approach to contentious politics, they contend that “social movements emerge and act within—and in turn reshape—a dynamic social environment” (Bosi et al., 2019). This theory states that depending on the interactions between the terrorist group and the state, escalation or de-escalation of the violence can be promoted. Within this theory, there is an opportunities and threats mechanism which argues that high levels of state repression diminish terrorists’ mobilization, resources and capabilities in all possible senses. This is added to the loss of legitimacy that comes with violence and diminishes public support, resulting in terrorists considering a change in strategy. Davis et al. (2009) state that in cases where there is great public support for the terrorist organization then the state counterterrorist measures tend not to be enough. Thus, if the terrorism roots in certain ethnic or nationalist collective grievances, it can be de-escalated through inclusive opportunities, policies, negotiations, and institutionalization that diminishes the grievances that led to the violence in the first place (Bosi et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2009, p. 265)

### ***3.3 Hypotheses***

With the literature that has been gathered and reviewed on the topic and with the two theories explained, this thesis presents the following hypotheses that have been developed from the theories:

H1. A stable and democratic political context leads to a secessionist terrorist group ceasing its armed violence without having achieved its objective

H2. Direct state action leads to a secessionist terrorist group ceasing its armed violence without having achieved its objective

## **4. Methodology**

### ***4.1 Research Design***

The previous section has stated two possible hypotheses to examine qualitatively in the analysis section to be then able to respond to the research question, and these derive from the theories and arguments presented in the theory section. Congruence analysis is a within-case method whose objective is to generate mechanistic evidence of a case's causal process (Beach & Pedersen, 2016, p. 252). To carry out this research, congruence analysis is the most appropriate research method to use. As this will allow this paper to analyze the complexity of the cases and observable implications from the generated hypothesis regarding the causal relationships between the variables (p. 253). What differentiates congruence analysis from other research methods is that it does not require explicitly theorizing the causal mechanisms that link the causes and outcomes within the case. Moreover, congruence analysis believes that theories are essential in social sciences as they aid policy-makers and scientific discourse, and through the use of case studies aims at contributing to them.

This research is going to be conducted through a single case study, as they are essential for examining complex political phenomena in detail. Single case studies provide for good links between theory and context-specific evidence, which makes them strong in their internal validity (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 237; Blatter, 2012, p. 5). Case studies are mainly interested in the effects of causes, they are centered on the dependent variable (Y), which in the case of this research is the decision of the secessionist terrorist group to cease its armed violence without having achieved its objective. Furthermore, Blatter (2012) states that case studies contain a great number of empirical observations, and what is key about them is the

focus on the “relationship between concrete empirical observations and abstract theoretical concepts” (p. 4).

#### ***4.2 Case Selection***

To conduct a theory-testing within-case congruence analysis, Beach & Pedersen (2016) suggest that the selected case to study has to have a real possibility of the hypothesis presented for the causal relationship between the variables to be present (p. 264). ETA has been chosen as the case study for this thesis as it was a nationalist and secessionist social movement which later escalated into violence and became a terrorist group. Contextual relevance is essential in the cases of repression and failure of violent social movements or terrorist groups, which is what this research paper is investigating, making ETA an excellent subject of investigation.

ETA's case also has a high historical significance as it was the last active social movement branded as a European terrorist group in the past decades, making it extremely relevant to investigate (Shepard, 2002; Alonso, 2011). Moreover, the fact that ETA transitioned to politics through a unilateral decision demanded by its own constituency and not due to negotiations with the Spanish state makes it very interesting (Murua, 2017, p. 109). Lastly, ETA is a great example of the expectations studied academically regarding the actions and reasons of nationalist and separatist (terrorist) groups, which aids to some extent in the generalizability of this research.

This research is particularly interested in the complexity of the conflict as it has been previously stated that it is a particular case within terrorism because of its political context and objectives. Therefore, the ETA group is appropriate for congruence analysis, as it will allow for a detailed analysis of the causal mechanisms which led to their decision to permanently cease armed violence. ETA has also been key in the portrayal and development of the current Catalan Separatist movements in Spain, and it has set a precedent for future social movements or organizations of nationalist and secessionist ideology in Europe. Lastly, my fluency in Spanish will allow me to gather and analyze different data sources that are only available in this language, providing this research with varied and thorough evidence to analyze.

### ***4.3 Data Collection***

This thesis will make use of a variety of sources and empirical data to provide a thorough examination of this complex topic. The sources are mainly academic articles in both English and Spanish. These are supplemented with newspaper articles from trusted and reliable sources, and reports from organizations about conflicts or victims of terrorism, which will help provide a more thorough analysis. They will be dated from 2011 to the present as it was in 2011 when ETA declared the definitive cessation of armed violence (Alonso, 2016). Consequently, that phenomenon prompted many scholars, journalists, and government officials among others to try to explain the reasons behind the decision. The information will be analyzed in the most objective way possible, taking into account the most relevant facts, through the use of various sources to support the examined hypothesis.

Additionally, as this research makes use of mainly secondary sources, it is essential to highlight that the selection criteria for them were regarding expertise and authority, making them highly reliable. Another criterion for their selection was that they contained information about the researched topic, went through a peer review process, and made use of reliable sources of information. For example, Zabalo & Saratxo (2015), make use of official documents and statements from the Nationalist Left and ETA, as well as wide previous research carried out on the topic of secessionist terrorism and ETA. Moreover, they are both researchers and experts on ETA, making their claims very valid. Furthermore, Alonso (2011; 2016) uses as evidence interviews and articles from ETA's leadership that were published in a Basque newspaper called Gara. He also uses previous research conducted by other scholars and himself, as he is an expert on terrorism. Lastly, Murua (2017; 2017), makes use of "the analysis of public and non-public documents and oral interviews with 37 actors directly involved in the process to bring about the end of ETA".

In order to compare the theoretical prediction with the empirical evidence there is a need for indicators, as they will help provide and establish what the evidence needs to contain for it to fit the theories and corresponding hypotheses (Beach & Pedersen, 2016, p. 253). On the one hand, the first hypothesis comes from the notion that a political opportunity closes when the regime stabilizes. Consequently, mentions of the transition to democracy, the stabilization of democracy and the possibility of democratic participation in politics in the sources will be categorized as the first hypothesis.

On the other hand, the second hypothesis states that direct state action is the key to the terrorist groups' cessation of armed violence. Nonetheless, they are influenced and amplified by several other factors such as the loss of external support. Thus, mentions of several different forms of direct state action such as the arrest of ETA members and leaders, the seizure of firearms and explosives, the loss of sanctuaries as well as counterterrorist operations constitute indicators that support the hypothesis. Moreover, mentions of public loss of support and key actions that perpetuated a bad perception by the populace, support the theory as well.

## **5. Analysis**

### ***5.1 Historical Background of ETA***

ETA was founded by young activists affiliated with the Nationalist Basque Party (PNV) as a way of promoting traditional Basque culture, and protesting the lack of freedom because of the dictatorship (Llera et al., 1993). They self-denominated themselves as a basque movement of national liberation and had the aim of using a direct action strategy to achieve their goals (Olmo, 2018). However, it was in 1968 that the armed violence started and then ETA evolved into a paramilitary group. Then they started perpetrating bombings, assassinations, and kidnappings throughout Spain and especially in the Southern Basque Country (Llera et al., 1993).

In 1973 ETA assassinated Admiral Carrero Blanco, who was the prime minister at the time, Franco's right hand and the future of the dictatorship. This resuscitated wide support for ETA as this assassination was seen as a way to bring democracy to Spain (Olmo, 2018). After Franco's death in 1975, there was enormous political instability in Spain, where violence heightened. Throughout the 80s, ETA established itself through a strategy of attrition, using different forms of armed violence to demonstrate how much capabilities they had in order to persuade the Spanish state to negotiate with them (Murua, 2017).

ETA was not limited to terrorist violence, they aimed at disrupting daily life in the Basque Country as well as politics. They established the "revolutionary tax" as a source of financing for their military operation which they made local firms pay through threats of violence



(Morales, 2018). The Spanish state fought ETA through different counterterrorist and legal measures. Additionally, there were several peace processes and negotiations with ETA that resulted in various ceasefires with which ETA ended up not complying (Morales, 2018). Shortly after the 2005-2007 peace process broke down ETA's militants discussed and exchanged written proposals and came to conclusions that ratified the resumption of the attrition strategy. This protracted the cycle of armed conflict to compel negotiations with the State, which made the 2005-2007 peace process the last attempt by the Spanish state at negotiations (Murua, 2017).

In conclusion, it is crucial to examine and explain the reasons why social organizations become terrorist groups and make use of violent means to achieve their political goals. In the case of ETA, they started making use of armed violence for a variety of reasons. ETA's violent actions were perpetrated through two dimensions; the first dimension was an instrumental one, using violence as the means to achieve their political goals (Zabalo & Saratxo, 2015). The second dimension was symbolic, used in a way to reinforce the feelings of Basque identity and to reclaim the nationalist and radical ideologies. Furthermore, ETA's violence was used to oppose the Spanish state as they wanted to manifest their sovereignty as a Basque nation looking for long-awaited independence (p. 368).

## ***5.2 Evidence Analysis***

### **5.2.1 Hypothesis 1: Established Democratic Political Context**

This analysis is a theory-centric case study, which will lead to specific observable implications that will be shown in the following sections. The first section of the analysis relates to the theory regarding the "closing" of the political opportunity. The establishment of a democratic political regime eliminates the political opportunity that exists with an authoritarian regime and the unstable transition process from one regime to another. Meaning that a stable and democratic political context leads to a secessionist terrorist group deciding to cease its armed violence without having achieved its objective.

The Basque country suffered a very unstable political context during the 60s and 70s, which made people more prone to radicalization and becoming members of ETA (Alonso, 2011). This was due to the multiple grievances that the Basques suffered during the dictatorship (Kassimeris, 2018; Olmo, 2018). However, the political opportunity structure started to

change when a more stable democratic political context was established, as there was a shift in the options and opportunities that people had. An example of this is that with the Spanish transition from Franco's dictatorship to democracy, the Basque Country was given a high level of autonomy. The autonomy was in terms of tax management, the establishment of a Basque police force (*ertzaintza*), and the recognition of Euskera as a co-official language alongside Spanish (Alonso, 2011). This all meant a step towards a more peaceful coexistence, which asked for democratic and constitutional means of addressing grievances and conflicts instead of violence, shifting the political opportunity structure that previously existed.

Consequently, due to the administrative decentralization that gave autonomy to the Basque Country, there was starting to be less support for violence from both the Basque and Spanish citizens. Moreover, almost 900 ETA members that had been exiled or imprisoned during the dictatorship were released or moved to prisons in the Basque Country, and measures of social reinsertion were put in place from 1982 onwards for the people willing to renounce to ETA (Alonso, 2011). Lastly, it is important to remark that according to a 2015 report commissioned by the Basque government, the majority of ETA's violent actions were not committed under Franco. Instead, they were carried out during the transition to democracy and started diminishing once it was more established (Aizpeolea, 2017). The aforementioned examples are the first indicators of the change in the political opportunity structure, which would continue to shift towards closing in the following decades.

The first remarkable event which marked a significant loss of ETA members in favour of democracy was in 1977 with the approval of the Amnesty Law (Olmo, 2018). This meant that for many ETA sectors, the possibility of participating in politics in the new democratic and constitutional system seemed a better option than continuing to advocate for violence. Consequently, in 1982 ETA-pm (political-military), one of the sectors of ETA, decided to dissolve, and its members joined different political parties of the Basque left (Olmo, 2018).

The Spanish government diminished ETA's capacity to carry out operations and recruit members by using targeted police raids, intelligence work, and passing counterterrorist laws (Mahoney, 2018). Furthermore, the organizations that made up the Basque Nationalist Left were banned, and newspapers that supported ETA's actions were closed (Zabalo & Saratxo, 2015, p. 372). The most prominent example of the banning of political parties is the Political Parties Act of 2002. Through this act, the Spanish government illegalized the Basque

secessionist party Henrri Batasuna, as it was considered undemocratic due to its ties to ETA (Olmo, 2018). This shows how the political opportunity structure kept closing as democracy became more established in Spain.

The aforementioned example meant that the Nationalist Left was left with very little chance of political representation in the Spanish Parliament as their electoral candidates were banned because of their ties to ETA's armed violence. Moreover, the posterior efforts of creating new political parties from the *abertzale* movement, which is the leftist, basque nationalist and secessionist ideology, were unsuccessful due to the act which hindered ETA's political voice (Olmo, 2018; Alonso, 2016). This supports the hypothesis that the democratic political context led to ETA's cessation of its armed violence, as violence was proven ineffective and even blocked political representation. Moreover, an investigated factor for ETA's unilateral decision to abandon armed violence was the loss of internal support it suffered (Alonso, 2016). As tensions arose within the terrorist group because of the decision to subordinate violence to the political interests of the Nationalist Left (Whitfield, 2015).

It is crucial to point out that even if ETA had more support, legitimacy, and justification during the authoritarian regime, they failed to understand armed violence, and "its narrow belief system was incompatible with modern Spanish democratic principles" (Kassimeris, 2018). After the 9/11 attacks, being deemed a terrorist group was problematic for ETA as both national and international counterterrorism measures and laws had become stronger (Olmo, 2018). Parallel to the transition from dictatorship to democracy, there was a shift in the national and international perspectives on terrorist violence, which produced a great loss in legitimacy for ETA's and their tactics (Zabalo & Saratxo, 2015; Murua, 2017, p. 98).

Thus, ETA realized that violence for political objectives was not effective. The use of violence made them lose legitimacy for their objective, especially in the newly found Spanish democracy. This was added to the very firm position of the Spanish Government to not negotiate with the terrorist group after the failed peace processes of 2005-2007 (Murua, 2017). Additionally, it is important to highlight that ETA declared the "definitive cessation of its armed activities" alongside to a statement of appeal to the Spanish government to open a dialogue process to resolve the consequences of the conflict and thus get over the armed conflict democratically (Alonso, 2016; Burns; 2011).

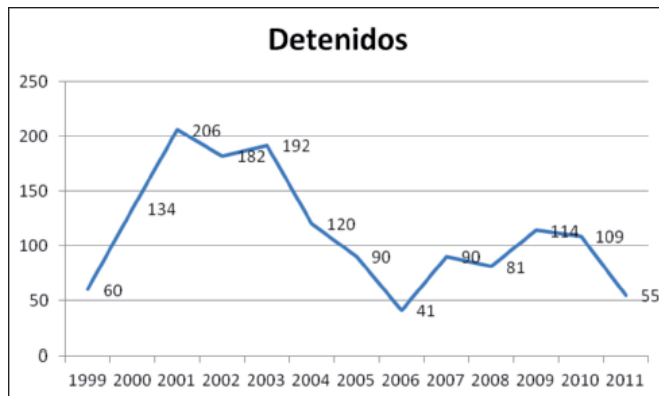
### **5.2.2 Hypothesis 2: Direct State Action**

The second section of the analysis relates to the hypothesis that direct state action leads to a secessionist terrorist group ceasing its armed violence without having achieved its objective. This is because state repression diminishes the terrorist group's capabilities to the extent that they can no longer carry out violent attacks. Moreover, the theory establishes that the disputes lead to internal loss of support, public loss of support and loss of (foreign) sanctuaries aid in the already inflicted repression by the state.

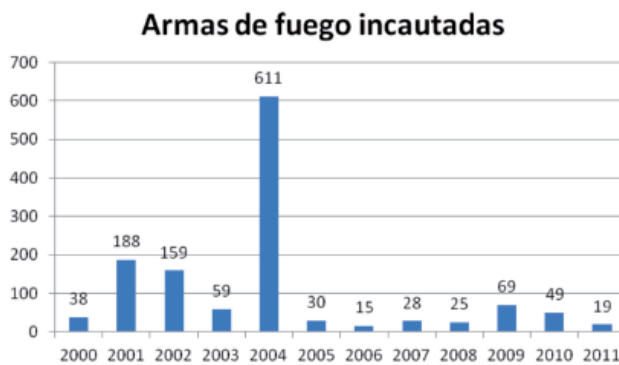
The main reasons for the definitive cessation of armed activities announced by ETA were motivated mainly by the operational weakening of the organization (Alonso, 2016; Zabalo & Saratxo, 2015). The State heavily repressed ETA, especially through the police and counterterrorist policies. The State's direct action caused serious setbacks in the operational field, which ended up decisively limiting the group's ability to direct its political-military strategy, which made it suffer a military-operational crisis that impeded its ability to carry out terrorist acts (Zabalo & Saratxo; Whitfield, 2015).

The direct state actions and repression managed to reduce ETA's operational capacity, and ETA's violent acts gradually decreased while its members were increasingly arrested and convicted. (Zabalo & Saratxo, 2015; Whitfield, 2015; Dominguez, 2017). This can be seen in Figures 1, 2 and 3 below, which present arrested members of ETA, the seized firearms and the seized explosives consecutively. From 2000 to 2011 a total of 1415 people were arrested and 907 were imprisoned (Dominguez, 2017, p. 15). It is important to remark that in the last years prior to the definitive cessation of violence, the seizures and arrested became very high-profile in terms of importance. Examples of key arrests happened in 2008 when Garikoitz Aspiazu Rubina, 'Txeroki' the alleged leader of ETA was arrested as well as his successor (Olmo, 2018). Moreover, by 2011 it is estimated there were only 50 active members capable of carrying out violent attacks (Burns, 2011).

**Figure 1.** Arrested members of ETA throughout the years (Dominguez, 2017)



**Figure 2.** Seized firearms of ETA over the years (Dominguez, 2017)



**Figure 3.** Seized explosives of ETA over the years. Quantity in kilograms (Dominguez, 2017)



After the death of Franco, the foreign sanctuaries in France where ETA members hid were not an option anymore as France stopped considering them asylum seekers and deported them to Spain. This Spanish-French collaboration led to the signing of an agreement in 1984, in which they committed to collaborating against ETA, which was key in weakening the terrorist group (Mahoney, 2018). The collaboration regarding counterterrorist measures

between the Spanish and French states was an essential aid to the already prominent repression by the Spanish government. Due to their collaboration, in 1992 the entire leadership of ETA was arrested (Murua, 2017, p. 95). The terrorist group managed to recover but that is considered a tipping point to the failure and diminishment of their military strength because even if they tried to compensate it by accelerating their campaign in the end, they failed to achieve their objective (p. 95).

Additionally, it is important to remark that the Spanish Government used “dirty war tactics,” which were heavily protested due to their questionable morality and legality (Zabalo & Saratxo, 2015, p. 372). An example of this is the illegal establishment of the Antiterrorist Liberation Groups (GAL) in 1982, whose purpose was to counter ETA’s attacks by arresting and torturing members hiding in France (Olmo, 2018; Euronews, 2021). State terrorism contributed for years to legitimizing the armed conflict in the secessionist arena. However, many members of ETA who the GAL arrested denounced treatments of abuse and torture, which at first helped ETA to maintain public sympathy and support (Olmo, 2018).

The Spanish government's prohibitions and imprisonments prevented ETA from even carrying out its violent operations, depriving it of its ability to expand and gain more support from society than it already had (Zabalo & Saratxo, 2015, p. 373). Nevertheless, ETA’s cessation of violence was not only because it was defeated by the state of law (Murua, 2017, p. 94). That idea fails to take into account that ETA was not merely a terrorist group; the context regarding how and why ETA was born and escalated during a dictatorship that was erasing the Basques’ identities is essential (Kassimeris, 2018).

ETA’s insistence on using violent means when the strategy was proven over and over to be ineffective towards the major policy change in Spain that they aimed for led to an enormous loss of support both from its political base and from the Basque citizens (Murua, 2017, p. 98; Mahoney, 2018; Zulaika & Murua, 2017, p. 341). The loss of support by the populace put a lot of pressure on ETA. Especially following the kidnapping and murder of Miguel Angel Blanco, the public expressed outright disapproval and horror (Zabalo & Saratxo, 2015, p. 373; Olmo, 2018). Thousands of people went to the street to protest, and he was still killed when the government did not comply with ETA’s demands of moving its prisoners to Basque prisons. This was when ETA suffered the greatest loss of sympathy, public support, and legitimacy (Aizpelea, 2017).

## 6. Discussion

The two theories that this thesis presents, although different, are not mutually exclusive, as they complement each other in some instances, showing the joint importance of context and direct action. The analysis section has tested two theories, and the provided evidence supports both of them in many aspects, which will be presented in this discussion. The first hypothesis is that a stable and democratic political context leads to a secessionist terrorist group ceasing its armed violence without having achieved its objective. This hypothesis has been analyzed through the use of political opportunity theory, which highlights the importance of the “closing” of the opportunity for the group to end armed violence. The evidence shows that the established democratic political context after Franco’s dictatorship was an important factor regarding the cessation of ETA’s violence, as it led to the state wanting to protect democracy in various ways such as the banning of the political party Batasuna for its ties to ETA.

Firstly, many newspapers and academic articles mention the cessation of violence due to a mix of pressure and political strategy from the Nationalist Left. This aligns with the notion that after the last failed attempt at negotiations to end the conflict through dialogue with the Spanish government, most of the Nationalist Left started advocating for a unilateral cessation of the violence as a last resort. Therefore, the ceasefire can be seen as a political strategy by the Basque Nationalist Left to return to the political stage after ETA’s cessation of violence. This happened; the Nationalist left formed a coalition that became the second Basque political force in the elections, as the linkage with ETA was not present anymore (Zabalo and Saratxo, 2015, p. 375). This shows that democratic political participation was seen as a better political opportunity for representing and achieving their objectives, as there was now a stable and democratic political context in Spain.

The second hypothesis is that direct state action leads to a secessionist terrorist group ceasing its armed violence without having achieved its objective. This hypothesis has been examined through the incorporated theory of direct state action and a dynamic approach to contentious politics. The analysis has shown plenty of evidence and completeness to its favor, containing evidence from academic articles and newspapers. Direct state action was widely present in the fight against ETA in the various ways that were provided in the indicators section, such as arrests and seizure of firearms and explosives. Nonetheless, it incorporates the external

support of ETA as a key factor in reinforcing the state's direct action. As many sources state that it took ETA to the point of no return in terms of support, which as the theory states reinforces the already effective state action.

Murua (2017) argues that the key factor for ETA's cessation of violence was the loss of internal support. However, the evidence presented in this research shows that the loss of internal support resulted from their diminished capacities due to two factors. Firstly, the direct state actions prevented ETA from continuing the violent campaign and secondly, the support of the political bases was lost in favour of democratic political participation. Thus, this supports the notion that ETA's cessation of armed violence was due to direct state action as well as the stable democratic political context.

## **7. Conclusion**

This thesis' research question is: *Why does a secessionist terrorist group cease its armed violence without having achieved its objective?*

This thesis concludes that the fundamental reason that led to ETA's decision to cease all armed violence without having achieved its objective was the direct state action and repression that greatly diminished their military-operational capabilities. This supports the theory and hypothesis that direct state action leads to a secessionist terrorist group ceasing its armed violence without having achieved its objective. Nevertheless, the analysis has shown some key insights regarding the importance of the political context for ETA's emergence and end. This also supports political opportunity theory and the hypothesis that a stable and democratic political context leads to a secessionist terrorist group ceasing its armed violence without having achieved its objective. This means that regarding the practical end of ETA, direct state action was the main reason, as it hindered their capabilities too much to continue the violent campaign. But, the bigger picture of democracy helped make that possible by changing the political opportunity structure, as it led to ETA's political bases advocating for democratic ways of achieving its objective.

This thesis complements previous work on the end of terrorist groups and ETA's cessation of armed violence, as it has revised research and claims by other authors. It was carried out through congruence analysis, using the single case study of ETA's cessation of armed violence. The claims that are made are on plausible causal relations regarding the case of



ETA through the use of newspaper articles, reports and previous research present in academic articles. A limitation to consider is that single case studies can lack external validity due to the difficulties in the generalization that may arise (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 237). The case of ETA has a specific context, thus, a comparative design is recommended to make more inferences (p. 255). Nevertheless, as this is a theory-testing method, the inferences made regarding the empirical evidence matching the theoretical expectations of this case are reliable.

Regarding directions for future research, one of the above limitations presented is the generalizability of single case studies. Thus, comparing why other secessionist terrorist groups such as the IRA or the FLQ ceased armed violence could provide further insights into this complex topic and its theoretical expectations. Moreover, a comparison of secessionist movements that differ in whether they resort to armed violence or not could be interesting. This is because, for example, in the case of the Catalanian independentist movement they have advanced in their objectives more than the Basque Nationalist left ever did, and it could be due to their unarmed mobilization (Woodworth, 2010).

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